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CIA's Stress on Technology Seen Crippling Intelligence

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When the director of central intelligence, Adm. Stansfield Turner, began turning 820 CIA operatives out into the cold on Halloween 1977, a cry went up from experienced intelligence officials that too much dependence was being put on technical collection of data and too little on good old-fashioned spying.

Turner denied it. He said the CIA's cloak-and-dagger section, the Directorate of Operations, was being slashed for reasons of economy and efficiency, not because of greater reliance on spy satellites and other exotic new tools.

The controversy subsided but did not die. And yesterday it was revived when President Carter told a news conference that he was concerned that the trend toward electronic intelligence might have been overemphasized to the detriment of gathering political intelligence and assessing it.

Carter made the comment in answering a reporter's question about a note he wrote Nov. 11. Addressed to Turner, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, it said he was "dissatisfied with the quality of political intelligence."

CARTER BEGAN his answer with general praise for the quality of the intelligence community's work. He was "very pleased" with it, the president said.

But recently he had become concerned that the political assessment of available intelligence is suffering, Carter added. So he wrote his note asking for an improvement in it.

The note was provoked by the failure of the CIA to foresee the strength of opposition to Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran. This failure has stirred a controversy in the intelligence community over the blame.

Last summer the third or fourth draft of a CIA political assessment of the situation in Iran began with a tone-setting sentence that said, in approximate paraphrase: "The shah, who holds firmly in his hands all the reins of power in Iran, is expected to preside over a peaceful and prosperous country into the 1980s."

THE DRAFT went on that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary situation."

In early September large-scale riots broke out, and continuing unrest in November forced the shah to turn over much of his power to a military government. Extensive public opposition to his rule remains, causing some observers to think that his reign is endangered.

Carter reiterated to his news conference that the United States has confidence in the shah and thinks his policies of modernization are correct. This country will not interfere in Iran's internal affairs, Carter added.

Informed sources trace the CIA's failure to foresee the strength of opposition to the shah and his royal court to a lack of contact with a wide range of political and religious leaders in the Moslem country. The shah regarded any U.S. contacts outside his circle as potentially undercutting him, and American officials were therefore generally content to talk only to that circle.

THIS IS RELATED to the broader problem Carter mentioned because the human element of talking to a wide range of people was lacking, and, as a result, the political assessment was too narrowly based.

The problem of a trend toward electronic intelligence to the detriment of assessment applies more directly to potential enemies rather than friends that the U.S. government is unwilling to offend.

The United States has always had great difficulty in planting or recruiting spies in such countries as the Soviet Union or China. As a result, it has for the past two decades or more turned to American technological inventiveness. From U-2 spy planes to the latest reconnaissance satellites, from sensitive radio monitors to over-the-horizon radars, machines have been used to obtain intelligence.

According to some estimates, some three-quarters of an annual intelligence budget of approximately \$5 billion now goes on technical collection and processing. But it has limits.

EXPERIENCED intelligence officials draw an important distinction between capabilities and intentions.

Learning intentions requires both spies to bring back enemy plans and good political assessment to try to figure out attitudes that go into planning. While spies might provide critical material, much of the U.S. government's understanding of what happens in other countries — and what is likely to happen in the future — is based on assessments of publicly available material.

It is this assessment of newspapers and broadcasts, coupled with the facts and gossip fed into the system by U.S. embassy political officers as well as CIA agents, that Carter was complaining about.